

# **The New Life Phase: An Overview**

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“This isn’t what I was expecting.”

It’s a constant refrain today from those in midlife. Rather than preparing for a quiet retirement, adults age 45 to 65 are facing periods of transition and change unprecedented in previous generations. From exciting new opportunities to challenges that seem to come out of nowhere, the new life phase of midlife – a stretching of the productive, energetic and purpose-driven peak of life – has challenged conventional ideas of human development. This paper offers three arguments:

1. There is a need for **a new narrative**, building on and expanding existing lifespan theory.
2. There is a need for **a framework and set of tools** to help adults navigate this new life phase of “ageless aging,” transition, and fulfillment.
3. There is the possibility, with the democratizing powers of technology, **to bring “the good life” to more people than ever before** as they embrace their Life Reimagined years.

## **PART I: The Need for a New Narrative**

### *Previous theories of human development*

Aristotle proposed a three-stage model of human development.<sup>1</sup> Solon divided life into nine stages, while Confucius identified six stages.<sup>2</sup> From the Talmud to Shakespeare, philosophers on the human condition have been fascinated with our growth through the life course.<sup>3</sup>

Modern psychology has placed most of its focus on human development in the early years, with the implied suggestion that our development stops at a certain point. For example, the work of Piaget, Havinghurst, Kegan and Loevinger ends in adolescence or

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<sup>1</sup> Lerner, Richard, *Concepts and Theories of Human Development*, (Mahwah: Psychology Press, 2001) 22.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis, John David, *Solon the Thinker: Political Thought in Archaic Athens*, (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2008) 79.

<sup>3</sup> Confucius, *The Analects*, (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1992).

early adulthood.<sup>4</sup> While Jung and Bühler have explored adult development throughout the life course, the most relevant work comes from Erikson and Levinson.<sup>5</sup>

Erikson describes eight stages, and yet his treatment of the mature adult years is sparse. The seventh stage – from age 40 to 65 – is a period typified by the individual’s desire to leave their mark, to contribute to the world and to feel productive and involved. If these goals are achieved, one will attain a sense of *generativity*, a feeling of meaningful contribution. If these goals are not achieved, a person will be left with feelings of *stagnation*, a disconnected, self-absorbed sense of loneliness.<sup>6</sup> Erikson’s eight, and final, stage is defined by the quest for integrity and a growing awareness of death.<sup>7</sup> In his later life, he acknowledged that psychosocial development may continue in later life, but his work was left incomplete.<sup>8</sup>

Levinson explores the life cycle as a series of “eras” or “seasons” that are composed of stable periods where life’s choices have been made, and transitional periods in which one season ends and a new one begins.<sup>9</sup> His research, conducted only with men, originally, highlights the importance of choice in midlife, and argues that the structure of development through the life course follows an underlying pattern for each individual that is a mix of development and socialization.<sup>10</sup>

While Erikson and Levinson’s work offers an excellent basis for understanding the life cycle, it is incomplete for our modern era. Development—both psychosocial and neurological has been found to continue to develop throughout the life course.<sup>11</sup> And the current demographic and cultural realities put new pressures, and provide new opportunities, that are changing individual’s abilities to design their futures. Building on

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<sup>4</sup> Mortimer, Jeylan T., and Shanahan, Michael J., ed. *Handbook of the Life Course*. (New York: Springer Science+Business Media, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Mortimer, *Handbook*.

<sup>6</sup> See: Guinee, James P. (1998). Erikson's life span theory: A metaphor for conceptualization the internship year. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 29(6), 615-620. doi:10.1037/0735-7028.29.6.615; Cherry, Kendra (2014). Generativity versus stagnation: The seventh stage of psychosocial development. Retrieved from <http://psychology.about.com/od/psychosocialtheories/a/generativity-versus-stagnation.htm> Accessed: 4/25/2014.

<sup>7</sup> Guinee, *Erickson's*.

<sup>8</sup> Erikson, Erik H, *The Life Cycle Completed*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company 1998).

<sup>9</sup> See Levinson, Daniel J. (1986). A conception of adult development. *American Psychologist*, 41(1), 3-13. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.41.1.3; Levinson, Daniel J., Darrow, C. N., Klein, E. B., Levinson, M. H., & McKee, B. (1978), *The seasons of a man's life*. (New York: Random House, 1978).

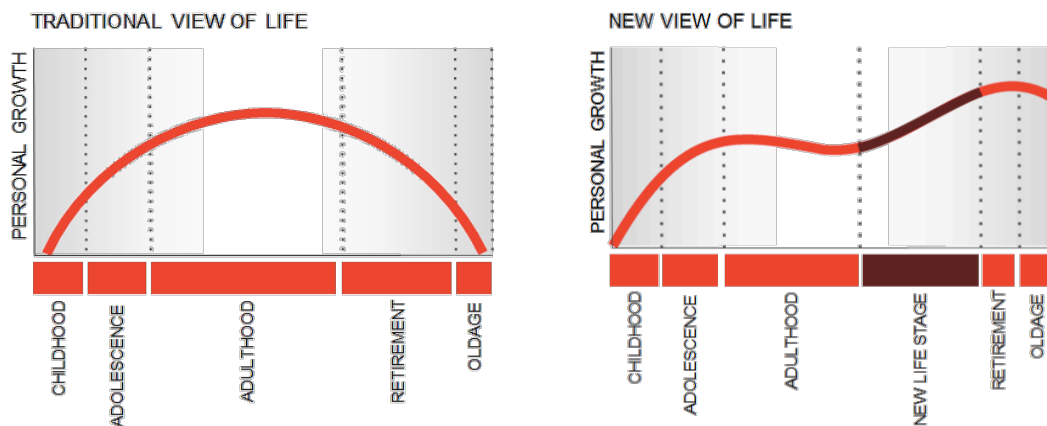
<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Metzler, Christopher J. (2013). Fifty Is the New Thirty: unpacking myths of the New Life Phase. Unpublished Manuscript, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.

these giants, we propose a new life course theory that recognizes life as longer, more complex and less predictable.

### *The new life phase*

In our construction, we suggest life phases that are more fluid and dynamic than previous stage or season models because we recognize that individuals vary, and that physical age and psychological age may not match at every point. The traditional view of life conceived of our development in a semi-circle with its peak at age 45 or 50, and a quiet decline to death on the other side of that milestone birthday. Incorporating the new life phase of possibility and continued growth changes the trajectory: Rather than beginning a precipitous decline, our productive, generative years have been extended, allowing us to reimagine our lives differently, to embrace second careers and to continue to thrive throughout the life course.



The new life phase is filled with paradoxes – loss and gain, finishing and starting, retreating and risk-taking, fear and optimism, liberation and attachment; caring for self and caring for other; saving the world and savoring the world. An extended, expanded midlife can be both enticing and unnerving. And while the “old story” was one guided by a goal of freedom *from* – freedom from ailments, suffering, loneliness – the new story will be one guided by a freedom *to* – freedom to explore, freedom to choose, freedom to thrive.

We’ve spoken with computer programmers who opened their own pizzerias, truck drivers who have gone on to teach aerobics classes, men and women who have embarked on new relationships, learned new skills, rekindled friendships, uncovered previously passed-over

passions to embrace the purposeful life they felt called to lead. And they weren't in their 20s when they did it.

The need for a new life phase is bolstered by the latest research in both neurological and psychosocial development throughout the life course. Research has shown that psychological resilience – the ability to adapt to stress, transitions and adversity – increases throughout midlife.<sup>12</sup> One possible reason may be that by middle age, the brain has learned to accentuate the positive.<sup>13</sup> Another possibility may be that by middle age, we've had our fair share of life experiences and have gained some perspective about the relative importance of events. Indeed, psychologists find that well-being follows a u-curve, with self-reported happiness at its lowest in the 30s and 40s, and then increasing steadily beginning at age 50.<sup>14</sup> This is in keeping, too, with longitudinal research finding that our lives continue to evolve in our later years and often become more fulfilling than ever.<sup>15</sup>

## **PART II: The Need For a New Framework**

The new life phase has emerged because of demographic and cultural changes, and has created uncharted territory for those who are living it. We highlight four main contributing factors to the new life phase – increased longevity, increased productivity, the rise of the therapeutic culture and a focus on purpose-based generativity – and describe the need for a framework and set of tools to help individuals navigate these changes.

### *Increased Longevity*

This generation of midlife and older Americans live longer, healthier<sup>16</sup> lives than ever

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<sup>12</sup> See: Almeida, David M., Horn, M.C. "Is daily life more stressful during middle adulthood?" In *How healthy are we? A national study of well-being at midlife*, Brim, O.G., Ryff C.D., Kessler, R.C., ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004) 425–451.

<sup>13</sup> van Reekum, Carien M., Schaefer, Stacey M., Lapate, Regina C., Norris, Catherine J., Greischar, Lawrence L., Davidson, Richard J. (2011). "Aging is associated with positive responding to neutral information but reduced recovery from negative information," *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, April; 6(2): 177–185.

<sup>14</sup> Stone, Arthur A., Schwartz, Joseph E., Broderick, Joan E., & Deaton, Angus (2010). A snapshot of the age distribution of psychological well-being in the United States, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 107 (22) 9985-9990. doi: 10.1073/pnas.1003744107

<sup>15</sup> Vaillant, George, *Triumphs of Experience: The Men of the Harvard Grant Study*, (U.S.: Belknap Press 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Vaupel, James W. (March 2010). Biodemography of human aging. *Nature*. 464, 25 doi: 10.1038/nature08984

before.<sup>17</sup> Some call it “ageless aging.”<sup>18</sup> These added years are enhanced by increasing and continued educational attainment, making this generation more educated than previous cohorts.<sup>19</sup> This additional health and educational attainment breed a new sense of optimism about the future: Midlife adults anticipate that their lives will be better five years from now than they are now.<sup>20</sup>

### *Increased Productivity*

While their parents considered retirement to be a time of travel, relaxation and enjoyment—with little work except on hobbies—most Baby Boomers consider some sort of paid work to be part of retirement, and a significant percentage report that they will never consider themselves retired.<sup>21</sup> Looking toward their future, 7 in 10 experienced workers plan to work during retirement, and the vast majority list social and psychological fulfillment—along with current and future financial security—as the primary reason.<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, older workers increasingly see their job as an integral part of their identity, with 83% in 2013 reporting that their job is an important part of who they are, up 6 points from 2007.<sup>23</sup> A desire to feel useful and to create meaning is increasingly important for this cohort as well.<sup>24</sup>

For those who have other ambitions for their new life phase – in addition to work, or in lieu of paid work – travel, improving health and fitness, and simply enjoy their lives, friends, and families top the list of goals for the new life phase. Isolation is fatal: While

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<sup>17</sup> “Aging Statistics.” *Department of Health & Human Services, Administration on Aging*. Available at: [http://www.aoa.gov/Aging\\_Statistics/](http://www.aoa.gov/Aging_Statistics/); Accessed: 4/25/2014.

<sup>18</sup> Shmotkin, Dov. “The Pursuit of Happiness: Alternative Conceptions of Subjective Well-Being,” *Understanding Well-Being in the Oldest Old*. 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 27-45.

<sup>19</sup> “ACS Educational Attainment by Degree-Level and Age-Group (American Community Survey): Percent of Adults 45 to 64 with a High School Diploma – 2005.” *NCHEMS Information Center for Higher Education Policymaking and Analysis*. Available at: <http://www.higheredinfo.org/dbrowser/?year=2005&level=nation&mode=map&state=0&submeasure=234>; Accessed: 4/25/2014.

<sup>20</sup> Fisher, Linda L. (2010). Sex, Romance and Relationships: AARP Survey of Midlife and Older Adults. *AARP*, (7) Retrieved from [http://assets.aarp.org/rgcenter/general/srr\\_09.pdf](http://assets.aarp.org/rgcenter/general/srr_09.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Love, Jeffrey. (2010). Approaching 65: A Survey of Baby Boomers Turning 65 Years Old.” *AARP* (4) Retrieved from <http://assets.aarp.org/rgcenter/general/approaching-65.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> “Staying Ahead of the Curve 2013: The AARP Work and Career Study, Older Workers in an Uneasy Job Market.” (2014). *AARP* (6, 57) Retrieved from: [http://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/research/surveys\\_statistics/general/2014/Staying-Ahead-of-the-Curve-2013-The-Work-and-Career-Study-AARP-res-gen.pdf](http://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/research/surveys_statistics/general/2014/Staying-Ahead-of-the-Curve-2013-The-Work-and-Career-Study-AARP-res-gen.pdf)

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

some mention hobbies, spiritual pursuits, and home projects, few want to relocate or “go it alone”.<sup>25</sup>

### *The Rise of the Therapeutic Culture*

More than half of middle-aged Americans have consumed some form of self-improvement advice, a statistic which underscores another important facet of the new life phase: The new life phase is driven by a generation comfortable with the therapeutic culture, psychology of wellbeing and the quest for a better self.<sup>26</sup> Self-improvement is the air we breathe now, part of the cultural lexicon, and most educated Americans are open to the ideas of popular psychology.<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, this trend has been building for decades. During formative years for the Baby Boomers, there was an increase in psychological awareness, vocabulary and expenditures among the American mass public. Veroff finds that in 1976 one-half of Americans said they would consider seeking help for a hypothetical personal problem, an increase from the one-third of respondents who said they would seek help in 1956.<sup>28</sup> Bellah suggests that between the 1960s and the 1980s – as the Boomers were in their 20s, 30s and 40s – as the number of Americans treated by mental health professionals increased three-fold.<sup>29</sup> And the self-improvement industry has continued to boom, making it a more than \$12 billion juggernaut today.<sup>30</sup>

### *Purpose-Based Generativity*

*USA Today* asked adults what they would ask a god or a supreme being if they could get a direct and immediate answer. The most popular question from the list they offered wasn't “Will I have life after death?” (that was #2) or “Why do bad things happen?” (that

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<sup>25</sup> Love, *Approaching* 9.

<sup>26</sup> Whelan, C. *Self-Help Books and the Quest for Self-Control in the United States 1950-2000* (Doctoral Thesis) University of Oxford, Oxford, England, 2003. U187685

<sup>27</sup> See: Rose, Nikolas, *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Bellah, R. N. et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. 1996 ed (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985); Giddens, Anthony, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991); Moskowitz, Eva S., *In Therapy We Trust: America's Obsession with Self-Fulfillment* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2001).

<sup>28</sup> Veroff, Joseph, Kulka, Richard A., Douvan, Elizabeth Ann Malcom, *Mental Health in America: Patterns of Help-seeking from 1957-1976* (New York: Basic Books, 1981) 68.

<sup>29</sup> Bellah, *Habits* 121.

<sup>30</sup> Marketdata Enterprises, Inc. (2012) *The U.S. Market for Self Improvement Products & Services*. December 2012, 5.

was #3). The top question adults would ask God or a supreme being was “What’s my purpose here?”<sup>31</sup> In fact, it’s *the* question of the new life phase, and very much in keeping with Erikson’s previous research on the importance of generativity in midlife.

Living with purpose means connecting to something bigger than the self and pursuing goals that are valuable and important toward achieving that end. There is increasing research pointing to the importance of positive emotion, engagement, healthy relationships, a sense of meaning and a sense of accomplishment as crucial to overall wellbeing – not just immediate gratification, money and happiness. In addition, opinion data show that the average American is thinking in terms of thriving and life satisfaction as well.<sup>32</sup> For example, analysis of polling data from 1988 to 2012 shows a substantial decrease in the number of people who believe money is the only real meaningful measure of success, and an even more substantial increase in those who view life satisfaction as a sign of success.<sup>33</sup> Flourishing in the new life phase means the quest for help and guidance in the search for new opportunities in work, family, health, fun and purpose in life.

Seekers in the new life phase may be searching for a language to discuss their transitions, a sense of identity around their next steps, reassurance of their choices and a community with whom to share information and from whom to receive encouragement. Lichterman finds that self-help users “are seeking not so much a perfect self as a new language for personal life.”<sup>34</sup> Being able to put words to feelings is crucial for both personal understanding and sharing your journey, and that is a valuable gift in the new life phase. In addition, users may be searching for hope of change and rebirth, research finds. Developing a new sense of identity can be part of this process.<sup>35</sup> Others may be seeking reassurance or confirmation that what they are feeling and doing is normal.<sup>36</sup> Life

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<sup>31</sup> USA Today asked adults what they would ask a god or a supreme being if they could get a direct and immediate answer. Among the top three questions were "Will I have life after death?" (19% of respondents) and "Why do bad things happen?" (16%). However, the highest proportion of those polled, 34%, wished to know the answer to the timeless question, "What's my purpose here?" (*USA Today*, May 28, 1999).

<sup>32</sup> The Futures Company. (2012). *American Express LifeTwist Study*. 2.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Lichterman, Paul. (1992) “Self-Help Reading As Thin Culture,” *Media, Culture & Society*, 14 (3).

<sup>35</sup> Simonds, Wendy, *Women and Self-Help Culture: Reading Between the Lines* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

<sup>36</sup> See: Englis, B. G. et al, “Where Social Perception Meets Reality: The Social Construction of Lifestyles,” in *Values, Lifestyles and Psychographics*, Ed. Kahle, Lynn R., Chiagouris, Larry (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997); Starker, Steven, *Oracle at the Supermarket: The American Preoccupation with Self-Help Books* (New Brunswick: Oxford, 1989); Fried, Stephen B., Shultis, Ann, *The Best Self-Help and Self-Awareness Books: A Topic-by-Topic Guide to Quality Information* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1995).



Reimagined provides this in a framework, community and shared language for the new life phase.

Life Reimagined is grounded in the belief that “the good life” evolves over the life course, and that development may occur at any point in time. Life isn’t linear, and our journey may be one of stuttering steps forward, leaps, falls and plateaus as a result of a mix of internal choice and external influence. We are each on our own journey, each an experiment of one, and Life Reimagined embraces the idea that there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach to life. Yet at the core of our quests in a variety of different aspects of life – relationships, stress, career, learning, resources and leisure – is a focus on purpose and meaning.



### **PART III: Bringing “the Good Life” to a Wider Audience**

Longevity, technology and changing culture have created a new life phase that is uncharted territory. While previous generations could model their adult years by the behaviors of their parents, increased longevity means we are outliving previous generation and changing cultural ideas of retirement encourage us to forge a new path.

Americans are rejecting the idea that opportunities are shrinking as they get older. We want to reach even higher, explore, pursue dreams and passions that may have been left

behind in earlier years. But we can't do it alone. In an age of possibilities, a growing number of people are looking for help, guidance to search for and discover new opportunities in work, family, health, fun and purpose in life.

Consumers have a growing expectation for a new, personalized guidance system for navigating transitions, discovering possibilities and living a good life. Life Reimagined is harnessing the power of digital, live experience and mass distribution to equip more people than ever to live their best lives. We believe that the new life phase will be guided self-driven and self-engineered, but guided by tools and connections to others on the same journey.

This provides an unprecedented opportunity to help people navigate life transitions—and Life Reimagined believes that these opportunities should be available on a massive scale. Yet policy must evolve with this new life phase as well: Navigating transitions cannot be done in a vacuum, and our social structure will need to understand, react to and reflect these shifts.

There is much work ahead, and many questions unanswered: What is the new experience of growth in midlife and beyond? What are the building-blocks of such growth? What will inhibit it? And what advantages will be realized during this new life phase?

We embrace the idea of a new life phase with hope—hope for a time when everyone will be able to pursue their best lives, embrace their full potential regardless of age. That is both the opportunity and the challenge of the work ahead.